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ABSTRACT

Recent changes in the field of early childhood education that suggest patterns of emerging professionalism in Australia are discussed. These changes include the following: (1) the development of a code of ethics for the Australian early childhood profession; (2) the transitions of training institutions into universities; (3) the development of degree courses for teachers and caregivers; and (4) the availability of recent Australasian publications for tertiary teaching. Also discussed are the roles of early childhood teachers, such as their position as front line professionals who are close to families that are in the process of change. The increasingly supportive relationships between caregivers and teachers and other professionals are noted. Contains 21 references. (LB)

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THE EMERGENT PROFESSION

ANN VEALE

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The theme of this conference, on the impact of change, has provided us with the opportunity for some guided reflection and some reflections–in–action about changes which have occurred and are progress towards a cohesive professional standing. In this paper, I propose to discuss some recent changes which can be construed as a pattern of events which taken together form a construction. To support my argument I will draw on professional activities such as the development of the code of ethics: the transitions of the training institutions into Universities; the development of the degree courses for teachers and for care givers; the availability of recent Australasian publications for tertiary teaching. Finally, I plan to review some of the literature that recognise the contributions that communities of practitioners make to what Nelson Goodmam called 'World making" (p 36, 1978). I will also cite the theory that professionalism in Education is a state of mind and that the title has to be earned.

The development of a code of ethics by the Australian Early Childhood Profession has been a collaborative professional project that has challenged the participants to considerable debate and dialogue. It has also stimulated a historical analysis of the changing patterns of views as expressed in Early Childhood Journals 1960–1990 (Ashby, 1991). In the background to these activities, the education and training of early childhood practitioners has been caught up in the maelstrom of changes in tertiary education that could almost be classed as revolutionary.

To make this account a more genuinely personal reflective statement, I propose to present some events in narrative form, and then to theorise about the significance towards the end of the paper. At the start of this year, our tertiary institutions became a part of a newly formed University, the result of an arranged marriage between several campuses of a former College of Advanced Education and the South Australian Institute of Technology. Overnight our courses became University credentials through newly accredited course programs.

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In the ensuing months two senior early childhood professionals have been promoted to the status of Associate Professor. This belated recognition of the status and national and international contribution of our professional colleagues across Australia by independent University promotion committees does collectively enhance the image and the degree of academic standing of early childhood care and education.

At the same time, intending students who have the prerequisite academic credentials are presented with career choices. They have the choice of applying for entry to a three year Bachelor of Teaching (Early Childhood Education) or alternatively a Bachelor of Social Science (Human Services : Child care). A fourth year pre-service degree of Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood Education) is available for intending teachers and the equivalent in-service degree is available for experienced teachers. While it would seem that there still exists a separation between the preparation of teachers and that of child care professionals that is not strictly accurate. Teacher education graduates have been enthusiastically seeking work in child care centres even before graduation and students with child care certificates receive credit if they transfer to the Bachelor of Teaching. The data collection of recent graduate employment patterns has been made complicated because of the multiple contracts which often mark the early employment history of graduates. Yet our figures suggest that up to twenty percent of graduating teachers accept employment in child care centres. While there remains two separate main career tracks for early childhood professionals, there is some possibility for cross over between the two degrees and students are in composite groupings for elective units. The two strands are therefore meeting and integrating together in a highly desirable way.

The next change that I wish to document lies in the greatly enhanced availability of recently published Australasian textbooks and Journals. When Ashby and Boulton-Lewis reviewed the most commonly used textbooks in Early Childhood programs in 1985 (Australian Journal of Early Childhood Vol 10 No 1) the six texts selected for that analysis were all from the USA. Now students can be exposed to recent textbooks from Australasia as well as from a range of

international publications and have access to current research developments through the Australian Journal of Early Childhood and other referreed international Journals. While the professional knowledge base has been expanding so also has student access to this knowledge base become increasingly available through electronic as well as print media. This in turn stimulates students in higher degree courses to focus their research skills on highly relevant and salient contemporary topics.

So far I have been thinking reflectively about changes that have already taken place as if the change cycle were already completed. In many of the contemporary social issues the change dynamic evolves from changing social roles and conditions. The recent schools councils publications on 'Australia's Teachers: an Agenda for the next decade' recognises the changed situation with regard to schools. The report says 'it should be noted that teachers have also taken larger socio–political responsibilities on themselves over the past two decades .....' (p28) Later it is said "the compass of teachers' work has been unquestionably expanded, and a case can be mounted that it is being performed increasingly professionally (p29). Whereas teaching has a long and honourable tradition, care giving as a profession is much more recent. My reflection cause me to hypothesis that early childhood professionals at the 'front line' because they are close to families who are in the process of change. From the intimate and trusting relationship between parent and care giver/teacher, can develop the need for the professional to act as an advocate for a child or family, and a facilitator for assisting with putting those in need in touch with a wider network of community support agents. These roles of social responsibility may have placed staff in positions of divided loyalties which the ethical documents may help to reduce the tensions and clarify priorities.

In her excellent analysis of the roles of early childhood teachers Saracho (1984) analyses the roles and knowledge bases, skills and attitudes, that contribute to the effective rendering of the teaoher's role. Give or take some of the debate over the relative influences of one role over another, it does reveal some of the previously hidden facets of teachers' work. Even teachers themselves may scarcely be aware of theoretical foundation of the principles they espouse.

Schon is the theorist who seems to be most able to explain the process whereby a community of practitioners can adopt a constructionist view of the reality and emerge as advocates and spokes–persons for their clients. Schon (1990 p33) says "Practitioners of a profession differ from one another, of course, in their sub–specialities, the particular experiences and perspective they bring to their work, and their styles of operation. But they also share a common body of explicit, more or less systematically organised professional knowledge and ..... an appreciative system – the set of values, preferences, and norms in terms of which they make sense of practice situations, formulate goals and directions for actions, and determine what constitutes acceptable professional conduct'"

One of the imperceptible changes that has become apparent in recent years has seen care givers and teachers working together in supportive relationships with other professionals. As increasing numbers of early childhood teacher education graduates have sought employment in child care programs they have found increased options for employment a rewarding teamwork situation. Following practicum placements in child care centres many student teachers find that they prefer the supportive framework of teaching in child care centres to that of the isolation of school class rooms or the pressure of large pre–school groups. They find that the interpersonal structure of child care centres are more fulfilling work situations and there are positions available. An additional benefit is the multi–professional possibilities of working with nurses, social workers and care givers.

The curriculum of child care givers has adopted a framework of social justice policies and life–time social issues. Child care centres have also been leaders in taking up health issues such as dietary guidelines. Many centres have developed policies of no salt in cooking and little or no sugar added for sweetening. Although many centres provide children with a hot dinner in the middle of the day, there is a trend towards vegetarian meals in preference to more traditional forms. of meat based meals. Many centres also adopt policies of non–violence approaches to solving conflict and towards long term goals of peace education. The emotional goals of children establishing a positive self–concept is often a fundamental priority. The curriculum priorities rely less on cognitive objectives than on social and emotional priorities.

The early childhood field has shown consistent initiative in providing a range of program types to suit the changing needs of families and children. Amongst these generic program types that have emerged are before and after school care vacation care. These programs may be centre based or school based depending on the school facilities. More recently we have seen emergence of 24 hour day care programs and work based child care programs. At the same time traditional preschools have been providing for some occasional care and full day care when needed. It is rare to find a preschool that does not have some children present for lunch on any day of the week. When combined with the facilities offered by family day care there is impressive flexibility available to families seeking childhood programs or support for their families. Integration of children with special needs is a policy in urban centres.

Unassuming professional early childhood teachers and workers have been bringing past experience and mature policies to bear on the unique situation in practical experience. If we accept the criteria of Clamp (1990) that professionalism is a state of mind and that the title is earned by an individual, we have only to look at the conditions that he outlines to appreciate that the early childhood professional has emerged. Clamp suggests that one earns the designation "to integrity, commitment, trust, and honest hard work". No parent would wish to trust their child to professionals who do not exhibit the above characteristics. Clamp also attributes the importance to "good old fashioned know-how" which is often glorified these days by the tile of competency. Clamp leaves no room for doubt that he does not mean the minimum capability but rather "those who show genuine pride in giving the best that can be given no matter what the degree of difficulty or the constraints imposed."

The second criteria listed by Clamp is integrity. The characteristics of a professional is that they "act in an unbiased, honest way ever mindful of giving value for the customer's money ...." The team of care givers needs to be able to trust their colleagues without question and reciprocate trust in return.

The third criteria is reliability. The commitment to staff, children and family remains constant with little or no fluctuation despite adverse circumstances.

The fourth criteria must be demonstrated in evidence of genuine caring or in his words "empathic humanism". The caring professional must adopt a non-judgemental approach to all clients both adult or children. In a professional situation there are codes of conduct that must be observed which are 'self-standardising, self-disciplining and self-governing' Despite low status, a poor salary scale and until recently deprived of a career ladder of qualifications, early childhood professionals have maintained their sense of perspective regardless of the deprivation that would normally deter even a dedicated professional. If one accepts Clamp's definition that professionalism is a state of mind, that is manifest by a set of characteristics by which one identifies a group of people engaged in a vocational calling, then one must accept that the early childhood profession is proving itself as a professional group in a changing community.

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